Army Discloses 1951 Virginia Germ Test

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NORFOLK, Va., Sept. 13 (UPI)—A Navy supply shipment from Mechanicsburg, Pa., to the Norfolk Naval Base was deliberately contaminated with bacteria in 1951 as part of a germ warfare experiment, the Army said today.

The test concluded the supply system was "vulnerable to biological warfare attack," but there were no indications any civilian or military personnel were harmed, an Army spokesman said.

Authorities said the three types of bacteria used in the test are relatively common organism in the natural environment and, at the time, were all believed to be harmless. Since then, however, it has been determined that two of the bacteria could cause potentially fatal pneumonia, in rare instances, if a large quantity is inhaled by either sick or elderly persons.

Public admission of the test drew sharp criticism from some military and local officials. The previously undisclosed test was performed by the Army in conjunction with the Navy.

Rear Adm. George Gorsuch, head of the Navy Regional Medical Center in neighboring Portsmouth, was quoted as saying biological testing of any kind near a populated area is "totally irresponsible and reprehensible."

"I don't think you'd find a naval officer today who would endorse such a thing," Gorsuch told The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot.

Dr. Mason Andrews, vice mayor of this city of 280,000 residents and a physician at Eastern Virginia Medical School, vowed to seek more information about the study.